New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Can-Can"

Daily Mirror

May 8, 1953

'Can-Can' Is a Smash Hit: Gay, Saucy and Rowdy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin brought a gay and giddy, saucy and sexy new hit to the Shubert Theatre last evening. It's called "Can-Can." It has a score by Cole Porter that falls pleasantly on the ears, and a rowdy book by Abe Burrows. It also boasts two of the most fascinating femmes to flash across the Broadway horizon in recent semesters.

THEY ARE Lilo (no last name), from Paris, and Gwen Verdon, from Hollywood. Lilo is petite and pretty. She has a huge voice. She can belt out a song with terrific effect. She has loads of personality. She's impish. She sparkles. She's completely captivating as a Montmartre gamine with an eye for a quick buck.

Gwen is a sinuous siren. Easy on the eyes. She's a dancing whirlwind. She's a vixen with comedy. She sends a high-voltage current across the footlights. She's altogether delightful as a can-can cutie with a roving eye.

Peter Cookson, who was so excellent in "The Heiress," is outstanding as a stern young judge who discovers that justice should be tempered with understanding. Particulary when there is Lilo for a teacher. He's handsome, ingratiating and sings exceptionally well.

HANS CONRIED, of the films, is likable as a wacky Bulgarian sculptor. He applies the slapstick with just the right touch of pathos, as does every good clown. He had the first-nighters rolling in the aisles as a frightened and unwilling participant in a duel. You will find nothing more hilarious the length of Broadway.

Erik Rhodes, Phil Leeds, C. K. Alexander, Robert Penn, Richard Purdy and Pat Turner also make the most of their opportunities. We wish Leeds and Alexander had more to do. They are first-rate comics.

Other assets are Jo Mielziner's atmospheric settings and Motley's gorgeous costumes. Both drew prolonged and merited salutes.

BURROWS has staged the book at a fast and furious pace, and Michael Kidd has choreographed wonderfully exciting dances. They got one of the most electrifying performances from their cast that we have seen on Broadway in a long, long time.

You'll be hearing Porter's "C'Est Magnifique," "I Am in Love" and "Allez-Vous-En" over the radio, on records and in the niteries for quite a spell. They are the standouts in the score. At least, for us. But you may prefer several of his other numbers.

"Can-Can" is no masterpiece, but it spells money in the bank. It's aimed at the tired business man, and it hits its mark with unerring accuracy. Its persuasive stars, high spirits and irresistible amiability add up to a perfectly swell evening of fun in the theatre.

FROM OVERTURE to finale, "Can-Can" caught the fancy of the first-nighters. They roared with laughter. They blistered their palms applauding. They brought Lilo and Gwen Verdon out for bows. They wouldnt let the show go on until they had demonstrated their appreciation of these dazzling darlings.

You'd better rush to the Shubert immediately if you want to see the town's newest click within the next several months. We think ducats will be as difficult to obtain as the combination for a Daily Double at Jamaica. "Can-Can" is in! With a rousing explosive bang!

"CAN-CAN"

Musical comedy with music and lyrics by Cole Porter; book written and staged by Abe Burrows; dances by Michael Kidd; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Motley; presented by Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, May 7, 1953. The cast:

Bailiff.....David Collyer
Registrar...Michael Cavallaro
Judge Paul Barriere.....C. K. Alexander
Court President..David Thomas
Judge Aristide Forester.....Peter Cookson
Claudine.....Gwen Verdon
Gabrielle....Mary Anne Cohan
Marie.....Beverly Purvin
Celestine.....Jean Kraemer
Hilaire Jussac....Erik Rhodes
Boris Adzinidzinadze.....Hans Conried
Hercule.....Robert Penn
Theophile.....Phil Leeds
Etienne.....Richard Purdy
Waiter.....Clarence Hoffman
La Mome Pistache.....Lilo
Cafe Waiter.....Jon Silo
2nd Waiter.....Ferdinand Hilt
Cafe Customer....Joe Cusanelli
Jailer.....Deedee Wood
Model.....Pat Turner
Mimi.....Dania Krupska
Second.....Arthur Rubin

New York Post

May 8, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Cole Porter Visits Montmartre

An itemized report on "Can-Can," which opened last night at the Shubert, would place on the credit side the dynamic and humorous dances that Michael Kidd has staged for it, a colorful physical production, the characteristic score by Cole Porter, the gay and stimulating excellence of a dancer named Gwen Verdon, and a wistful comic called Hans Conried. In the debit column, I would be forced to place the singularly unenterprising book by Abe Burrows, a strange air of incompleteness, and at the risk of upsetting international friendship, a French comedienne known as Lilo, who is a sort of Gallic Betty Hutton.

There is, however, another important item in connection with "Can-Can," which is almost certain to give it the required box-office stimulation. It is nothing more or less than our old friend, sex. The new show, which is set in the Toulouse-Lautrec country of Montmartre in the nineties, tosses that prized commodity at the customers with bright, humorous, insistent and commendably frank abandon in its story, its comedy and, above all, in its genuinely exciting dance numbers, and I would be deceiving both you and myself if I tried to deny that the effect gives a rather in-and-out show its inescapable interest.

Even though the libretto has come to be far more important to musical comedy than it once seemed, it is certainly possible for a girl-and-music show to be eminently effective with a fairly frail story. The trouble with the narrative that the customarily dependable Mr. Burrows has provided is that it keeps getting in the way of things. Dealing with a stuffy young judge who disapproves of the new-fangled can-can and goes to the picturesque dives of Montmartre to expose the vice there, it tells, of course, about how he falls in love with one of the most notorious of its denizens. It is edifying but oddly flat.

One of Mr. Porter's songs is called "Live and Let Live" and it goes on to tell us philosophically that there is no accounting for other people's tastes. It is a sound point, and, therefore, when I describe the lady known as Lilo as being reminiscent of Betty Hutton, you will possibly take it as ecstatic praise, even though I don't intend it to be. Anyway, the French visitor, who can make a lot of noise with a song, is given to the sort of enthusiastic mugging that delights many and distresses at least a few. Being in the latter category, I couldn't share in last night's admiration for her playing of the bad girl with the good part.

Gwen Verdon

As to Miss Verdon, I am emphatically with the majority. She, I think, is by way of being the latest sensation. She is good-looking and vivacious, without being ostentatious about it; she can play comedy with a sure skill, and she is a joy as a dancer, combining agility, grace, inventiveness and humor in the happiest proportions. And Mr. Kidd has given her and the show some dance numbers that are colorful, exciting and satirically comic at the same time. "Can-Can" is in fine shape when it dances, and, fortunately, there are several numbers that enliven the evening enough to make up for the story's lulls.

Although, on first hearing, I would say that this is not one of Mr. Porter's most brilliant scores, it has the great virtue of being typical of his work, which means that it is bright, debonair, tuneful and intelligently humorous. Jo Mielziner's sets are, as usual, beautiful, and Motley's costumes are colorfully effective. Then there is the fresh comic skill of Mr. Conried, as a futile artist, who has a particularly good scene when an unfavorable review of his work is read to him, and Peter Cookson sings and acts pleasantly as the priggish but romantic judge. I think the sex and dancing will make "Can-Can" the town's new hit.

DAILY NEWS
May 8, 1953

'Can-Can' an Opulent Music Show With a Fine Cast and a Slow Book

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Can-Can," an opulent musical by Cole Porter and Abe Burrows, opened late yesterday afternoon (7:30 P. M.) at the Shubert Theatre, and will offer Spring and Summer showgoers a wonderful cast, some good Porter tunes, some grand dancing, several really funny scenes and a plot which started out to have a message and lost the message.

Burrows, who is responsible for the plot, has imagined something about censorship and conviction without trial in the Gay Paree of 1893. A police-court judge, young and handsome and new on the job, figures that it is not right to imprison midinettes (laundresses) for dancing the can-can (the can-can) in off hours. He falls in love with a woman who runs a dance hall and employs these exuberant damsels in their spare time—but happily his fight for justice finally gets lost in some excellent music-show numbers.

Lilo, Cookson Featured.

The featured players are Lilo, a Parisienne who is making her Broadway debut, and Peter Cookson, a local actor of good experience and quality who is making his debut as a musical comedy hero. Lilo is blonde, well-stacked and highly charged. She reminds me a bit of the Jeanne Aubert of years ago, and her singing style ranges from Ethel Merman to Edith Piaf—which is quite a range. She also is an enthusiastic comedienne and I like her very much.

Cookson, too, is a novelty. Heretofore a well-behaved straight actor, he suddenly becomes a highly attractive musical comedy leading man who can sing very well. My wife likes him very much.

It's Verdon's Night.

But the greatest joy of last evening was a lissome lass with reddish hair and a docked pony-tail coiffure, Miss Gwen Verdon. Miss Verdon, a dancer and a comedienne, stole the show from Burrows, Porter, Cookson, Lilo, costumer Motley and scene designer Jo Mielziner. In this happy theft Miss Verdon was aided by Michael Kidd, who has devised three splendid ballets. One of these ballets is a lively Quatz' Arts Ball; another is a vivid and humorous elaboration of an apache dance. The ballet in the middle is a history of what happened in the Garden of Eden in one easy lesson, and the sight of Miss Verdon taking a chunk out of the old apple and immediately discovering the usefulness of a fig leaf is one of the funniest moments of the stage season.

Melody and Rhythm.

The Porter tunes are a cut below the score for "Kiss Me, Kate," but they are unmistakably Porter. They have zest, melody and interesting rhythm—the most interesting lyrically and rhythmically being "If You Love Me Truly," which is too good to be juke box fodder. The juke boxes can be supplied with "I Am in Love" and "C'Est Magnifique." The orchestra arrangements by Philip J. Lang are admirable, and so is Genevieve Pitot's music for the ballets.

The uniformly admirable cast of principals in "Can-Can" includes Erik Rhodes as a precious art critic and Hans Conried as a dreadful artist. The high comic scene of the show is a duel between these two, and Burrows has written and staged it to perfection.

Mielziner's sets are numerous, beautiful and efficient, ranging from bals musette to the glorious top of Montmartre. He has created a lovely Paris without ever nodding to Toulouse-Lautrec, an artist who gained fame in those gay days for his impersonation of Jose Ferrer.

Journal American
May 8, 1953

Group of Pros Blend Talents for Smash Hit

By JOHN McCLAIN

NOTHING much to this business of producing a musical. Take an attractive era, like Paris, 1893, get yourself a fella that can write some catchy French-type tunes and another guy for jokes and a little plot to hang them on, drop in a ballet here and there and, Buster, you're home in bed with a hit.

That seems to be the simple formula employed by the Messrs. Feuer and Martin who brought their highly vaunted "Can-Can" into the Shubert Theatre last night.

Like all true professionals, they make everything seem easy. The score by Cole Porter is effortless and charming; the book by Abe Burrows doesn't overreach, neither does his direction; even the swift and exciting choreography of Michael Kidd is never urgent or harried.

There is a pervading sense of relaxed confidence all around—and it is well justified. This is a socko success.

"Can-Can" kind of sneaks up on you. The opening is attractive, but it doesn't exactly blast you out of your chair. Even the first appearance of Lilo, the mysterious French import, is something short of sensational.

She sings a number called "Never Give Anything Away" and you are tempted to say, "This is a French girl who looks like Betty Hutton and has been told so too many times."

But then, a little later, she sings "C'Est Magnifique" and you begin to think maybe Betty Hutton is an American girl who looks like Lilo. And from about that point onward you become caught up in the strange contagion that spreads through audiences during successful premieres, and it is only a matter of hoping the pace will prevail.

In this case the tempo mounts pleasantly enough through the rest of the act and is climaxed by a highly satisfactory costume ballet called "The Garden of Eden."

There are not a confusing number of people in this exercise, they all happen to be skilful and decorative and Gwen Verdon, as Eve, adds to her earlier laurels by emerging as a gifted danseuse.

Act two picks up the pleasant and leisurely thread of the story with some comedy entanglements involving Hans Conried, one of the funniest characters this side of "Guys and Dolls," and builds quickly to an Apache ballet, again featuring Miss Verdon, which stopped the proceedings for a protracted period last night. She does a slow-motion bit with Ralph Beaumont which will be talked about long after the show has hit the road.

Solid Singing

This brings us to a lovely rooftop scene overlooking the city, an hilarious duel between Conried and Erik Rhodes, a reprise of "Magnifique" and, finally, the big windup with Lilo singing a solidly reminiscent Cole Porter number called "Can-Can."

We all know that to have anything come off with such facility means, seriously, hours and days of back-breaking effort from all hands. For such, another nod to Burrows, who wrote and directed; to Jo Mielziner, for his beguiling and unpretentious sets; to Motley for the costumes.

Also a special citation to Peter Cookson, the leading man, who remains charming and confident throughout, the while uncorking an excellent singing voice.

And, of course, plaudits to Feuer and Martin, who put the whole thing together. These lads are represented by two other effortless efforts, "Where's Charley?" and "Guys and Dolls."

It's a cinch, isn't it?

"Can-Can"—*continued*

The New York Times
May 8, 1953

Cole Porter's 'Can-Can' Includes a Book by Abe Burrows and Ballets by Michael Kidd

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since the new musical show at the Shubert is called "Can-Can," no one should be surprised to discover that the dancing is the best thing in it. Cole Porter has written the music and the lyrics. Abe Burrows has written the book and also attended to the direction. But it is Michael Kidd, the choreographer, who every now and then picks "Can-Can" out of the old operetta routines and turns it into a modern show. With Gwen Verdon leading the ballets with impudence, recklessnes and humor, the dancing is spectacular.

Although "Can-Can" looks gay and beautiful (thank Jo Mielziner and Motley for that) and although it brings us vivacious Lilo from Paris to represent naughtiness attractively, is this yarn that Mr. Burrows has given us a twentieth century product? It looks astonishingly like the frisky old stereotypes with labored jokes that "Oklahoma!" and "Guys and Dolls" mercifully put out of business. Both as littérateur and stage director, Mr. Burrows works hard. What he achieves sounds like heavy-handed facetiousness from the past.

* * *

Nor is the score one of Mr. Porter's most original works, for there are some recognizable clichés in both the music and the lyrics. But the music is gayer than the book. Mr. Porter has composed it in several styles from good hurdy-gurdy music to Parisian balladeering, with some joyful part singing in the Arthur Sullivan style. The score has been exuberantly orchestrated by Philip J. Lang.

And when Lilo takes charge of a song, she raises the temperature of the theatre perceptibly. She has a good brass-band voice; she is a stunning blonde and she tosses herself into the middle of the show with gratifying abandon. This is not Mr. Porter's liveliest score, but Lilo is one of his liveliest minstrels.

In fact, the acting is generally superior. As a judge who becomes infatuated with the girls of the Montmartre dance halls, Peter Cookson is an amiable romantic lead and he sings pleasantly. Hans Conried, tall, willowy and suspicious, is a very funny untalented sculptor, and Erik Rhodes is an amusing critic of the arts. Toward the middle of the second act Mr. Conried and two satellites put on an excruciatingly funny duel scene—pure low comedy, staged and acted with humor and gusto.

For that bit of horseplay, many thanks. It is pure theatre. But the dancing is "Can-Can's" real contribution to hilarity. The Garden of Eden ballet at the close of the first act is a vivid caricature of that ancient fable. It swiftly sketches in everything from inchworms to flamingos and sea horses; and Miss Verdon's spinning and grinning portrait of Eve is brilliant. The second act includes the breezy cartoon of an apache dance; it is witty in design and skillful in the acting. And, of course, "Can-Can's" personal can-can at the finale is racy and festive.

Mr. Porter and Mr. Burrows are fascinated by the wickedness of Montmartre in the Nineties. But it is Mr. Kidd, the choreographer, who makes real theatre out of revelry in the dance halls. He and his dancers are dry and satirical about it, and also enormously expert in their performing.

Herald Tribune NEW YORK
May 8, 1953

THEATER

'Can-Can'

By WALTER F. KERR

LET US pause this morning to pay tribute to Jo Mielziner. For the newest Cole Porter carnival, "Can Can," which whipped flashily into the Shubert last night, Mr. Mielziner has dreamed up three or four of the most engaging and evocative sets of his career.

There is a garret with splintered windows which seems to soar right out over the Paris of 1893. There is an unlikely cabaret built into an underground laundry, with candles alight on every girder, and with the wash flapping fancifully overhead. There is a stunning rooftop on which lazy brick chimneys and drowsily tilting shutters lean toward the Eiffel Tower. And there are, in addition, a half dozen handsomely monochromatic effects—a blue map of Paris used as an act curtain, a reddish-brown Court of Assizes, and a mouldy green Bal de Paradis—which are almost as dazzling as the calculated stunners.

* * *

Another deep bow is due choreographer Michael Kidd. The period musical which Abe Burrows has built around the effort of the Parisian courts to calm down the nation's more tempestuous laundresses is far and away at its most dynamic when Mr. Kidd is in charge. The first act finale is a splendidly idiotic miming of certain historic events in the Garden of Eden, studded with enchantingly animated sea-horses, leopards, caterpillars and kangaroos. The second act detonates midway with some Apache violence which is—in spite of all that other people have done to the material over the years—breath-taking.

* * *

Mr. Kidd has done us the further service of introducing a red-headed extrovert named Gwen Verdon. During the dialogue stretches Miss Verdon plays an aspiring dancer who must neglect her career to support the sculptor she loves, and she handles the part easily enough. But from the time she starts playing footsie with a tempting apple in that first act finish, she is the dance discovery of the season. Miss Verdon comes upon sex with a magnificent astonishment, rueful, dismayed, interested, and deeply pleased all at once. And the abandon with which she takes over the later Apache business—sending chairs and males spinning with a flick of her ankle—is devastating. The audience at the Shubert held up the show for some minutes in Miss Verdon's honor last evening, causing the actress to take a breathless bow in even greater deshabille than the producers of "Can Can" probably intended.

* * *

And there's another hard-working enchantress making her local debut in the Feuer and Martin spectacle. Her name is Lilo, she comes from the concert halls of Paris, and she has the voice of an out-size trombone. Mlle. Lilo squeaks, pouts, roars, sings through her teeth, and everywhere does more than full justice to the tunes Cole Porter has written for her. She also has an especially fetching way of winding up a number: opening her eyes wide and biting her lips as though she were still drunk with power and bursting to do the whole business over again. I doubt that anyone is going to make "I Love Paris" more rousing than this platinum-haired, full-throated dynamo does.

* * *

At this point, however, these tributes—like the show itself—become a bit thinner. Abe Burrows' book, which has to do with a young magistrate unluckily in love with a lass he must prosecute, has a sturdy enough outline for conventional musicomedy manufacture. He has been casual about the humor, though, letting long, long passages march bleakly to indifferent blackouts, and he has relied far too heavily on what might be called the Vaudeville Reverse ("Tell him I don't want to see him. I wouldn't see him if—wait a minute, I'll see him.") There is some last-minute fun in the familiar business of a duel, and Mr. Burrows has found the absurdities of advanced sculpture a congenial target. But on the whole the text sounds as though Burrows had been called in to do one of his famous rewrite jobs and had only got around to yacking up a couple of scenes.

* * *

And Cole Porter's score is by no means his most distinguished. No Porter score is hard to listen to; neither is this one. But it couldn't have been hard to write, either. The composer has cribbed from himself ("I Am in Love" is his current nod to the popularity of "Night and Day") and he has—surprise of surprises—been laggard about his lyrics. He doesn't resist the 'derriere' rhyme, and for a great deal of the show he is content with the standard simplicities of "When love digs in, and takes you for a spin; when every night, your loved one holds you tight, Oo-la-la, it's magnifique!" Even so, "I Love Paris," "It's All Right With Me," and "Allez-Vous-En" are eminently pleasant tunes.

* * *

Peter Cookson is the harassed young lawmaker and, in addition to a considerable personal charm, he displays an astonishingly serviceable baritone voice. Hans Conried plays furiously, and sometimes very effectively, as the spindly sculptor who would gladly trade his woman for a good notice in the press.

* * *

The production is thoroughly slick, majestically commercial. The best things in it are attractive, indeed. But don't look for inspiration this time 'round. Composer and librettist are in a hand-me-down mood.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

May 8, 1953

'Can-Can' Bounces Its Way to a Hit

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Can-Can" is a great overblown musical, drenched with all the signs of being a big popular hit. It lasts three hours and you sure get your money's worth.

The show is billed as being Cole Porter's, rightly enough, for few people can write such an insinuating score. You are likely to hear "C'Est Magnifique" and "I Am in Love" till they literally run back out of your ears.

Last night the audience did some elevation on the billing. The little French import, Lilo, went into the show a star. And Gwen Verdon came out of it a star.

Can Hurl a Song.

This Lilo is slender, pretty and blond, and has a voice like a Tucker or Merman or Piaf. If it's physical comedy you like, this is the girl to give it to you. She grimaces, wiggles and punches her elbow in people till it hurts. Maybe some of the energy last night was nerves, and she will be more relaxed and less relentless. But anyway she can hurl a song into the air with the best of them.

Miss Verdon is a devastating redhead, beautiful on the Arlene Dahl order, and a dancer with real style and personality. She spellbound the house with the quadrille and the can-can, and after the Apache uproar they had to send her out for a last bow with her costume already off and clutched in front of her. They really loved her and you'll hear a lot more about this.

The Apache number is tops of Michael Kidd's choreography. It is a brilliant meld of violence, comedy and slow motion, an amusing, astute comment on the Bohemian Paris of 1893, and timeless French love for a buck.

Getting the Goods.

Peter Cookson is co-starred with Lilo, as a judge who sets out to get the goods on the little owner of an illicit night club where the laundresses do wild dances. Naturally he falls in love with her, goes in business with her, and finally helps prove her innocent. The melodic quality of Cookson's singing is a big and welcome surprise.

Abe Burrows, director, might have been shorter with Abe Burrows, author of the book. Intertwined with this legalistic plot is another elaborate story of Gwen Verdon, bless her heart and her dancing feet, who is torn between her Bulgarian painter friend, played deliciously by Hans Conried, and the art critic, elegantly done by Erik Rhodes.

The reading of the criticism and the rooftop duel are the evening's comic high points. That rooftop Jo Mielziner designed with Paris in the background got a gasp and a hand all its own, as did the earlier studio set. The Motley costumes are progressively eye-catching, from the working clothes of the girls, through the Garden of Eden costume ball, to the final Apache and can-can outfits.

Audience Helps.

Last night the audience helped make some very touching moments. Lilo was visibly moved by the reception of her first solo, and her relief at being liked was memorable. The crowd's increasing delight with Miss Verdon was exciting to feel, as it adored her Eve more than her laundress, and her lady cutthroat more than her Eve.

The show is splashy, vigorous and Parisian enough to be a distant cousin to "Miss Liberty," but it is earthier, bawdier and bigger.

"Men of Distinction"

DAILY NEWS

May 1, 1953

'Men of Distinction' a Witless and Seedy Comedy About a Vice Case

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Men of Distinction," a desperate, tasteless and witless comedy by Richard Condon, was produced at the 48th St. Theatre last evening by Chandler Cowles and Martin Gable.

Mr. Cowles also presented himself as an actor in the role of a socialite heir who accepts $50 presents from what he calls his "sales organization"—a group of young ladies whom he also terms "working career girls."

It is not difficult to surmise that "Men of Distinction" has been inspired by a recent vice trial. During that trial the judge ruled that evidence presented by the prosecution should not be made available to the press, on the grounds that it might be too spicy and sensational for the public good. As a newspaperman jealous of the freedom of the press I was and am opposed to the judge's attitude; yet I am now impelled to withhold from the public the details of the plot of "Men of Distinction."

A Seedy Intrigue.

This censorship by me is not, however, because "Men of Distinction" is so spicy and sensational that it might inspire mass adult delinquency on the part of the readers of this family newspaper. It is because the plot is plain punk as it flounders through a seedy intrigue involving a mayor, a police inspector, a district attorney, a glib press agent, an underworld character and sundry living displays of strapless gowns.

Robert Preston is starred as the press agent and he talks long and hard. The company also includes two very good comedians, David Burns and Orson Bean, who remain gallant to the end. The pleasantly ornate setting is by David Ffolkes. Martin Gabel directed.

"MEN OF DISTINCTION"

Comedy by Richard Condon; staged by Martin Gabel; settings and costumes by David Ffolkes; presented by Chandler Cowles and Mr. Gabel at the 48th Street Theatre, April 30, 1953. The cast:

Mayor Thomas Quinlan.....
Donald Foster
Inspector Dennis Mannion....
Rex Williams
Pringle....Vera Fuller Mellish
Peter Hogarth..Robert Preston
Frobisher.....Mort Marshall
Claudette Chalfonte.....
Diana Herbert
Judy Chalfonte.....Jean Carson
Carleton Pelter.....
Chandler Cowles
Edgar Grassthal....Orson Bean
Aunt Florence.....Fran Carlon
Edna.....Alma Slocum
Barbara Edison...Fran Keegan
Doris Commodore..Hollis Irving
Marvin Flynch...Ralph Bunker
August Volpone.....Martin Ritt
Daniel Gaffney....David Burns
Melissa Marguery.....
K. K. Kensington
Dolores Biltmore..Dulcy Jordan

Daily Mirror
May 1, 1953

Condon Comedy Aims At Satirizing Morals

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Men of Distinction," Richard Condon has sought to pen a comedy in the spirit of the English Restoration. His characters are thoroughly unscrupulous, all out for an easy buck. And such a vice as pandering has no stigma for them. Conscience and virtue are things to mock.

THE HEDONISTIC Peter Hogarth is a successful and ruthless publicist. The aristocratic and effete Carleton Pelter is the clever manager of a string of party girls. The foxy August Volpone is a shrewd and hard-boiled racketeer. And even Daniel Gaffney, "the fighting district attorney," isn't averse to a little larceny."

Each tries to cheat and betray the other during a vice investigation, but it ends in a stand-off. Each has too much on the others. So, meek little Marvin Flynch, a tax expert, has to take the rap for his wiser and more predatory acquaintances. They really feed him to the wolves.

Condon has created some amusing characters, and penned some lusty and often hilarious dialogue. There are many genuinely funny moments to be enjoyed at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre. But hardly enough for a hit. The trouble with "Men of Distinction" is that it rings the changes on a single joke for too much of the evening.

CHANDLER COWLES and Martin Gabel have given the new arrival the benefits of an excellent cast and a gorgeous production by David Ffolkes. Gabel also has staged the comedy at a fast pace and with a preponderance of broad strokes. He has sacrificed subtlety for raffish gusto. His approach in this instance is the correct one, even though it isn't completely successful.

Co-producer Cowles stands out as the spoiled, selfish, decadent dandy who earns a handsome income introducing pretty and expensive girls to bored men of means. Robert Preston is fascinating to watch as the smooth, precious, cobra-like publicity purveyor.

Orson Bean contributes a diverting imitation of Eddie Mayehoff. He is a ridiculously pompous and stodgy young television scripter. Martin Ritt garners solid laughs as a swaggering, cunning hoodlum. David Burns uses a slapstick effectively on the D. A. with the feet of clay. And Ralph Bunker is just right as the timid patsy.

THE LOVELIES who entertain the lonelies for big fees include Jean Carson, Diana Herbert, Alma Slocum, Fran Keegan, Hollis Irving, K. K. Kensington and Dulcy Jordan. In addition to being an eye tonic Miss Carson is also a first-rate comedienne.

"Men of Distinction" is interesting because it attempts to satirize modern morals via brittle, cynical, classic medium. We only wish author Condon had been able to bring off the tour de force. But he hasn't. Not quite. His inventiveness and imagination merit richer rewards than they are likely to get.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
May 1, 1953

'Men of Distinction' Comes to Broadway

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

As a political satire and a farce about morals, "Men of Distinction" is so brash and irreverent that anyone with an ounce of civic pride would like to think of it as vastly exaggerated. It opened at the 48th St. Theater last night.

When you settle down and think it over, though, after its cyclonic and capricious finish, you may wonder just how far from literal it is. Its outrageous activity could lead to just the sort of 3-D slice-of-life expose we have grown used to in the past few years, in hearings and in trials.

The immediate parallel to the Jelke case is too close to deny. A scion of great wealth, with no cash on hand, here makes a good thing of providing "dinner partners."

Who's Nailing Whom?

By virtue of a television panel snow, he tries to get the district attorney to star under the sponsorship of a company owned by a gangster the DA is planning to annihilate. The ramifications of the play concern who has what goods on whom, at any given moment, until in the end, a fall guy is appointed for the DA's campaign.

Face it, the play is more bold than witty.

This is an uphill show, in terms of comparison between its long-winded beginning and its speedy finale. The first act does little but plant characters and plot points, then verbally elaborate on them: Robert Preston is the ego-centric and ingenious promoter. By sheer energy and hearty spirits, he keeps the first half of the play above ground.

He has worldwide connections, half a dozen phones of different colors, and a splendid wardrobe. The boy with the girls is Chandler Cowles, languid and seemingly stupid, as he figures 15 percent of all women will think him irresistible enough to sell their all for his benefit.

Enter the DA.

Orson Bean is a loose-jointed TV producer, whose idea for a "People's Conscience" panel supplies the wherewithal for the plot. And Martin Ritt is a broad-mannered, jovial gangster of limitless activities. Ralph Bunker is the soft-spoken tax expert who plays a surprise part in the ultimate settlement of all the troubles.

About half-way through the play, David Burns comes into the picture as the district attorney. It is at this point that the fun really begins. He plays an apoplectic parody of a public servant, in just the sort of tense and unreal style a play like this needs.

Considering the subject matter, and certain lapses of taste, it is remarkable how little downright vulgarity there is in "Men of Distinction." One reason for this is that the bevy of girls involved is so agreeably dumb, so well-meaning, and so very beautiful. Of this squab squad, Jean Carson makes the funniest points with her lines, and is the most radiant to look upon.

David Ffolkes has dressed them like models from the best houses, and given the play a setting of rampant purple and scarlet.

The New York Times

May 1, 1953

'Men of Distinction,' a Comedy, Has Its Premiere at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre

Neither Svengali, Machiavelli nor all the backroom plotters for the thrones of Shakespeare's kings had anything on the characters who inhabit Richard Condon's "Men of Distinction," which made its appearance at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre last night. There is not a single individual with a justifiable claim to intelligence, respectability or humaneness in the lot. And what makes matters even more unsavory for a theatregoer is the unhappy fact that there is not a discernible purpose for this parade of depravity.

If the reader at this point is laboring under the illusion that "Men of Distinction" is something out of the Grand Guignol of Paris or perhaps that it is a piece of heavy-thinking literature it might as well be explained in a hurry that nothing of the sort was intended. For, oddly enough, Mr. Condon calls his play a comedy. Taking for his theme the corruption, cynicism and vice of a big city, he has set out to write a humorous commentary around these brutal facts. Perhaps he really meant to write a satire. But, if he did, his hand is as subtle as a sledge hammer and his bite as sharp as that of a baby hamster. Actually, what he has concocted is a tasteless bit of burlesque that might have made some sense as a brief sketch in a naughty revue.

* * *

Whether Mr. Condon derived the inspiration for his play from some recent scandals that have been in the headlines, your correspondent cannot know; he has not been made privy to the playwright's inner thoughts. But the resemblances are marked. He has a high-powered public relations man—a genius for working angles—controlling the destinies of the city's district attorney, the mayor and the police inspector. This gentleman of distinction is involved with a so-called socialite who is a procurer. He also is closely allied with the metropolis' No. 1 racketeer. And to prove everything, Mr. Condon, naturally, shows us the expected bevy of party girls.

The story is rather involved, with everyone trying to frame everyone else, the rap finally being pinned on an innocent tax consultant. It all takes place in the public relations man's sumptuous home, which has been supplied with the proper flamboyancy by scene designer David Ffolkes. The walls are red velvet, the telephones red and gold. And Mr. Ffolkes has provided for the girls the necessary and revealing gowns.

Some thoroughly able players are trapped in this unfortunate visitation and under Martin Gabel's driving direction everyone labors heroically trying to believe the lines allotted. Robert Preston, who was so delightfully comic in his last local appearance as the football fanatic of "The Male Animal," fumes, cajoles and sweats in the role of the public relations man. David Burns, one of our better funny men, seeks valiantly to caricature the venal and ambitious district attorney; Martin Ritt plays the boorish racketeer; Orson Bean, a young fellow with an idea for a television show, and Chandler Cowles, the dandy of cafe society.

There can be no doubt that the subject matter of "Men of Distinction" is pertinent. A playwright with a point of view probably could turn it into a sharp satire of modern life and the evaporation of solid values. But Mr. Condon's approach is collegian and misguided.

L. F.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 1, 1953

THEATER

'Men of Distinction'

By WALTER F. KERR

A NOTE tucked gently away in the program for "Men of Distinction," the new tenant at the 48th St. Theater, makes bold to say that "the characters in this charade are fictional; should any one of them bear a resemblance to any hoodlum or hussy, dead or alive or as yet unborn, set it down as pure coincidence."

Thereafter the evening presents us with a young socialite, heir to several fortunes, who is profitably engaged in the business of supplying attractive 'companions' for out-of-town business men, who rather resists publicity for fear of what it will do to the family name, and who nevertheless finds himself unpleasantly involved with a fire-eating District Attorney.

* * *

You can draw your own conclusions. Unfortunately, you will also have to write your own play. The town could stand a nice, raffish, hard-hearted farce—perhaps along the lines of those tone-poems Hecht and MacArthur used to turn out—having to do with the more engaging aspects of calculated delinquency. But, for all that author Richard Condon has got himself a pleasantly mocking title and a suitably ribald basic situation, his delinquents have a decidedly juvenile air about them. The 'hoodlums and hussies' who populate "Men of Distinction" tend to smack their lips, ogle the customers, spell out the chicanery in letters the size of kindergarten blocks, and in general behave like a bunch of Rover Boys trying ever so hard to be wicked.

* * *

Not that Mr. Condon doesn't come across some funny notions here and there. I rather liked his image of the District Attorney who once turned the other cheek and then had to hold his head in that position for seven years. He has also provided the same gamey official with some handsome rhetoric: "The voters want the sort of rich, spicy action which leads to a worthwhile trial." Nor was I altogether averse to having one of the blonder members of this "sales organization" pick up a copy of "Popular Mechanics" and query, in dead earnest: "Have you ever known a really popular mechanic?"

But most of the time the dialogue is busy tangling itself in this sort of construction:

"How can Carleton be only twenty-nine? He's got a dog that's eleven."

"I though it was a sheep."

"It's a sheep-dog."

* * *

And all of the time there is a sad lack of that honestly jaded, casually callous, and thoroughly dyspeptic spirit which alone gives bite and brio to this sort of amoral lark. Mr. Condon seems to be pop-eyed at what he has wrought, rather than dry and wry about it; everything that should be easy and urbane turns frantic and arch. In addition, co-producer Martin Gabel has staged the offering with all the low-farce stops out, so that what is worst about the play becomes what is loudest about the play and a kind of amateur giddiness takes over.

As is usual with this sort of spring foolishness, a couple of performers crawl cheerfully out of the wreckage. In this case they are vaudeville and night-club virtuosos who know how to take care of themselves when all else is going down around them. David Burns mouths the District Attorney's fanciful blasts with great gusto. And Orson Bean makes a small, but quite spectacular, place for himself as a young television producer, complete with crew-cut, hypnotic grin, and magnificently swiveling jaw.

* * *

Robert Preston goes at the role of a public relations counsel who has had the misfortune to have his phone tapped with feverish energy, lavishing his entire line of catlike smirks and elaborate hand-wavings on a stubbornly unfunny creation. Chandler Cowles, also a co-producer, has hired himself to play the careworn, pasty-faced, but unutterably genteel Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth and Yale man—he has been thrown out of all of them—and he brings a certain weary, though not exactly incisive, elegance to the business. Martin Ritt and Ralph Bunker do nicely with a couple of minor caricatures.